

**Theme:** Soviet Ethnic Cleansing in the Memory of Russian Germans: Perceptions and Collective Trauma

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The history of Soviet totalitarianism resembles a fairly well-researched area until the issue of mass repression based on ethnic grounds is not raised. Particularly, the history of ethnic cleansing against Russian Germans has not been articulated properly both in terms of the Russian and Eastern European academic agenda and in terms of the global interest of historians in the topic [Hirsh, 2005; Martin 2014; Poll 2018; Iashchenko 2020]. As attention is only paid to some problems of the detention of concentration camps and the institutional side of the implementation of repression [Khlevniuk 2016; Poll 1999], a comprehensive analysis of the history of the Russian Germans is lacking. On the one hand, most Russian archives containing sources on ethnic cleansing and mass repression in the USSR are classified; on the other hand, contemporary historical policy in Russia restricts, through censorship, the freedom of academic creativity by prohibiting the study of certain topics from the Soviet past. Due to the historical laws passed in Russia in 2014-2021, further research into crimes against ethnic minorities and mass repression is not possible due to the threat of criminal prosecution<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, the current policy makes the collective trauma of certain minorities more comprehensive. The trauma is getting wide under the censorship pressure and affects even time-distanced generations since they do not have the right to remember and speak up about their history.

Consequently, contemporary historiography of Soviet totalitarianism is extremely fragmented and its development is permanently dependent on the policy of archive confidentiality. Hence, there is a growing interest in sources of personal origin (written memoirs and oral sources), as they appeal to a new source allows not only to construct an image of the Soviet past without opportunistic facets, but also to consider the problem of the collective memory of oppressed ethnic communities in historical dynamics. It certainly sounds striking when oral sources are referred to as "new historical sources". Though these sources have not been used extensively in the field, due to the inaccessibility of them in the first place.

This study focuses on two main aspects of the history of ethnic cleansing in the USSR of Russian Germans (early 1930s-mid-1950s)<sup>2</sup>: 1) collective community memory; 2) the comparative reconstruction of historical narratives in-state representation and family narrative. The complexity of the *research question* posed is explained that the collective memory of this community is, by

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<sup>1</sup> Amendment to the Russian Federal Law of 1 July 2021 on the Commemoration of the Victory in 1941-1945 War; Presidential Decree on the Prohibition of Comparing the USSR and Germany; Criminal Code Article 354.1 on the Rehabilitation of Nazism, etc.

<sup>2</sup> This study highlights both isolated examples of local ethnic cleansing in 1934, 1937 and 1939, and mass ethnic cleansing in the first half of the 1940s.

definition, in conflict with the official historical discourse. *The comparative approach* is crucial to identify the main differences in the two versions of representation of the past (family history and “official discourse”). *The study hypothesises* is that the collective memory of Russian Germans also includes a collective trauma that is shared across generations in the community, it is important to identify the origins of the prolongation of trauma in an intergenerational perspective, and the divergent evaluations of the past in family and public space appear to be one such source.

*The source base* of the study already includes 200 interviews with victims of ethnic cleansing during the Stalinist period, as well as with representatives of the non-victim generations of the Russian German community. For collecting the data, 3 field studies were conducted in Perm Krai (Russia), the autonomous Republic of Komi (Russia), and the Moscow region (Russia) in 2018-2020. The expeditions provided unique interviews from survivors of deportation, torture, and incarceration in Soviet concentration camps.

Most of the oral sources have never been engaged in research or published; the uniqueness of the historical sources used is further enhanced. To date, no archives of the oral history of Soviet totalitarianism and mass repression exist in Russia and several post-Soviet countries. Therefore, the analysis of these interviews will provide a qualitatively new perspective on the history of the USSR through the prism of the memories of the victims of that regime, who possess gender, name, face, and personal history, rather than a number in the archival summaries.

Between July 2020 and June 2021, 50 interviews were collected (interviews were conducted remotely with people living in Russia, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Germany). There are already plans to collect another 50 interviews by October 2021 in the Urals and Siberia (Russia), as well as in Germany and Ukraine, where there are also large diasporas of Russian Germans. It is also planned to work with the archives of the international organisation Memorial in Krasnoyarsk, Perm, and Moscow. The study will also involve archival documents illustrating the official version of the events of the 1940s (fonds of the political history of the State Archive of Ukraine, the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, etc.).

The diversified nature of the source base (digital and analogue sources) also makes for an *interdisciplinary approach* to analysis. It should be underlined, the study uses digital humanities methods to organize data and work with multiple layers of information using close and distance research methods. Firstly, the sources are needed to be accumulated in a database based on SQL programming language. Secondly, will be developed a Python-based toolkit software for the frequency of mentioning keywords and content analysis of interviews is envisaged. Thirdly, computerised emotional analysis of audio (Praat) interviews and network analysis of interview transcripts (Gephi) are applied.

*This methodology* aims to answer what topics are important to respondents, whether there are topics that remain relevant across generations, whether the narrative changes over time and what the respondent's emotional involvement in the story is, etc. The methodology had been developed for the MA thesis, and presented at international conferences and academic awards[3]. After that, it was improved and suggests fewer steps to get the results from now. Accordingly, the study is based on the approaches of oral history, memory research, digital humanities, and comparative history.

Nevertheless, the explanatory models of memory theory have proved to be insufficiently inclusive for the specific problem [Hirsch 1993; Moroz 2014], so it became necessary to develop a methodology relevant to the issue at hand. First of all, the study introduces the concepts of "*prolonged trauma*", and "*ghost-community*". The problem is that the discussion of collective memory concerning different generations, offers a view of third and subsequent generations' memory in terms of social memory and cultural memory, in the formation of which media agents are actively involved [Assmann 2014]. However, this study deals with an ethnic community that is completely absent from Russia's political, historical, or cultural agenda. Thus, Russian Germans are a *ghost-community*, which does not exist in public space and exists only in private space, in family memory. Consequently, the collective memory of this community is based solely on the transmission of the family narrative, which acts, among other things, as the basic ethnic identity of Russian Germans. Furthermore, the collective trauma is shaped not only by the memorial narrative, emphasising the dramatic history of the ethnic group, but also by contemporary factors: the political isolation of Russian Germans and the silencing of the experience of Russian Germans in public history and increased censorship.

### References

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